

## The Energy Bill Gets Worse

**T**his country needs a purposeful long-term energy strategy that reduces its dependence on foreign oil and deals with climate change and all the other air-quality issues that are directly related to the burning of fossil fuels like oil and coal. So how has Congress chosen to develop such a strategy? By passing two mediocre energy bills and then handing the task of reconciling them to Senator Pete Domenici and Representative Billy Tauzin, both reliable allies of the fossil fuel industry (although Mr. Domenici is also a big fan of nuclear power) and neither a visionary thinker. Since Labor Day, these two veteran deal makers have been cherry-picking provisions they like, discarding those they don't and for good measure infuriating their colleagues by adding new items of their own.

This process is undemocratic even by Congress's clubby standards. Even worse is the almost certain outcome: a tired compendium of tax breaks and subsidies for energy producers leavened by a few gestures toward energy efficiency. The best evidence of Congress's bias in favor of production as opposed to conservation is the fact that the legislation would authorize oil drilling in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge while doing nothing to improve the fuel economy of automobiles and light trucks — a more certain and less destructive path to both energy independence and cleaner air.

Indeed, we can think of only a handful of positive provisions in these bills. One — a Senate proposal that Mr. Tauzin is trying to kill — would require power plants to generate 10 percent of their electricity from renewable sources by 2020. A second would open up the huge natural gas reserves on Alaska's North Slope, where oil drilling already occurs. Exploiting these reserves would obviate the need to go poking around in ecologically sensitive areas elsewhere, which the administration seems determined to do. A third provision would devote serious money to promising ways of cleaning up coal, the dirtiest but most plentiful of fossil fuels.

None of this, however, propels the country toward a new energy future. What America needs, and what the bill comes nowhere near providing, is a game-changer: a huge effort to help Detroit build entire fleets of fuel-efficient vehicles using available technology, for instance, or an equally ambitious program to convert cellulose to fuel — not just corn but grasses, wood and agricultural wastes of all kinds — in quantities large enough to make a real dent in oil imports.

Instead, Congress insists on thinking small, settling for timid research programs and unnecessary tax breaks for established industries that, as it happens, provide lots of campaign money. Since the Democrats also benefit from this money, they are unlikely to do the honorable thing, which is to filibuster this bill into extinction.